

LUKE 12-24
FOR YOU

MIKE MCKINLEY
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Luke 12 – 24 For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Luke 12 – 24 For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

*For Dave and Brenda Pauken,
with gratitude for all of their friendship,
loyalty, and labors in the gospel.*

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 translation (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- ESV: English Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 12 - 24

Imagine that reading the Gospel of Luke is like climbing a mountain. The first few chapters take us into the lower foothills, introducing us to Jesus and the significance of his ministry. He is the promised Savior, who will reign on the throne of David as King over God's people (Luke 1:32-33; 2:11). His arrival heralds the good news of God's favor for the poor, the oppressed, and the needy (4:18-21).

From that point, we begin our climb in earnest, as Jesus launches his public ministry of healing, exorcism, and teaching. Over the next few chapters we continue our gradual ascent, with Jesus revealing his divine power (4:36; 5:1-11, 24), and explaining both the surprising nature of his kingdom (6:20-49; 7:18-23) and also what is required of someone who desires to be a citizen of it (9:23-24).

The first major peak in our climb comes in chapter 9, where Peter identifies Jesus as "God's Messiah" (v 20). Jesus affirms this confession—but then surprisingly tells his disciples that he will suffer terribly, be killed, and then be raised to life on the third day (v 22). From this point on in Luke's Gospel, everything will be leading us towards Jesus' suffering in Jerusalem: "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (v 51).

Toward the Final Peak

In this second volume, we join Jesus and the disciples on their long and steady approach toward Jerusalem, on something like a plateau extending from Luke 9 to Luke 19. Along the way, we will encounter some of Jesus' best-known and best-loved parables—stories of incredible love with surprising heroes. We will also see Jesus teaching about the nature of his return and intensifying his preparation for his disciples as the crisis of his crucifixion looms ever larger on the horizon.

In the middle of chapter 19, we will find ourselves at the base of a final grand peak, a foreboding cliff that disappears into the clouds.

As Jesus enters into Jerusalem, the unthinkable begins to unfold with a sense of terrible inevitability—the Lord Jesus is betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified. Luke’s account of these world-changing events is careful, detailed, and often heart-wrenching. But just when the darkness begins to seem overwhelming and our trip seems as if it might have been a terrible mistake, the clouds give way to the glories of the resurrection and the joy of the disciples in knowing that their Lord is alive forever.

Your Guide

Luke is a faithful and sure guide to this difficult terrain. He is writing within the lifetime of eyewitnesses of the events (1:2), has done the hard work of investigating properly all that he has been told by those eyewitnesses (v 3), and has written to his first recipient, and to you, so that “you may know ... certainty” about the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah (v 4).

Luke carefully marks out the path and helps us to see where we ought to set our feet. If you are reading this book but you are not yet a follower of Jesus, then I would encourage you to look closely as you climb this mountain. Consider carefully the purpose and meaning of Jesus’ suffering. If there was another way for you to experience God’s forgiveness and salvation, why would Jesus have endured all of these things? Also, notice carefully what kind of person rejects Jesus and what kind of person receives him joyfully. People who wanted to cling to their own goodness as the basis of their relationship with God did not find much to be excited about in Jesus’ ministry. But people who knew how badly they need mercy and forgiveness found Jesus’ teaching and death and resurrection to be good news indeed.

And if you are already a follower of Christ, you will find that much of this section of Luke’s Gospel will challenge you. Though we are saved by grace, there may be something of the Pharisee’s impulse to self-salvation still remaining in us, which reveals itself in the way that we (mis)treat others. Look carefully at the way that Jesus chose to

suffer for you so that you could be forgiven. Allow Luke's account of the Savior's agony on the Mount of Olives, his humiliation before his enemies, and his death as a curse on the cross to humble your pride and inflame your love for Christ. Take full advantage of Jesus' pointed warnings about how we must live in light of his future return in glory so that you can live well now in light of that day.

Expect to be transformed by Jesus as you meet him in his word. And enjoy the certainty that Jesus' kingdom is open, that you have entered into it, and that one day you will experience it in all its glorious fullness.

1. FUTURE PRESENT

Everyone plans their actions in the present based on what they believe the future is likely to hold. A person who thinks that rain is likely to fall will make that belief evident by the fact that they have rolled up the windows of their car. A person who believes that the value of a certain stock is about to rise will act on that belief by investing their money in it.

Toward the end of chapter 9 Luke told us that, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). The second half of Luke’s Gospel unfolds in light of that larger purpose, and each encounter seems to move Jesus closer to his death in Jerusalem. The tone of the second half also shifts noticeably, as Jesus spends more time preparing his disciples for life in the time between his departure and his return in glory and judgment.

In this passage we find Jesus addressing his disciples, and in **12:40*** he gives them a key piece of information about the future: “The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man” (e.g. Luke 5:24; 7:34), a term that echoed an Old Testament vision of end-time glory and authority found in Daniel 7:13-14. Here Jesus describes a day when his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven will be in the past and he will return to earth. And in the brief teachings about masters and servants that surround Luke **12:40**, Jesus makes it clear that when he returns, it will be in order to bring judgment—blessings for the faithful and punishment for the unfaithful.

* All Luke verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

Good and Bad Servants

In **verses 36-38**, Jesus describes the reward that servants might receive for their **diligence*** while waiting for their master to return. If a master returned to his home after the household had gone to bed (**verse 38** imagines an arrival that took place in the middle of the night or toward daybreak) and with no advance warning (remember, this was a world without phones and email), he would be very pleased to find that his servants were awake and waiting for him. The fact that they were keeping watch for their master even when they had no special reason to expect his return at that moment testified to the fact that they were loyal servants. This kind of servant would receive a most unusual reward—the master himself would take their role, seat them at his table, and serve them himself (**v 37**). The master's return will be good for servants who are "caught" being faithful.

Another example (**v 42-44**) deals not with servants in general but with one in particular who is appointed as a manager. This manager is placed in charge of the master's servants, specifically to provide food for them at the proper time (**v 42**). When the master returns and finds the manager fulfilling his appointed role, "it will be good for that servant" (**v 43**); the master will respond to his servant's faithfulness by putting him charge of everything that he owns. While this principle applies broadly, we should note that it serves as a reminder for those who would serve as leaders in Christ's church. Pastors are servants of Christ who are also managers, charged to provide spiritual food for their fellow servants. They are to discharge their duties faithfully until Christ returns, at which point "it will be good" for them.

Not all servants are rewarded for the way that they conduct themselves, however. Instead of faithfully waiting for their master's return, the servant described in **verses 45-46** responds to the uncertainty surrounding the timing of their master's return by beating the servants and stuffing themselves with food and drink. When the master returns unexpectedly (**v 46**), the punishment he metes out is even more

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 191).

shocking than the reward described in **verse 37**: the master will cut the servant to pieces. This expression should mostly likely be understood to represent **figuratively** some kind of extremely severe punishment; if it were meant **literally**, it is hard to understand how the servant could be assigned “a place with the unbelievers.” To be placed with unbelievers (the Greek word is literally “faithless”) is an appropriate result for a servant who has been unfaithful to his master. The punishment for this servant is total rejection by his returned master.

A Matter of Faithfulness

The meaning of these **parables** does not lie far beneath the surface: following his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus would ascend into heaven for a time. When he returns, he will reward or punish his servants based on their faithfulness to him during the time that he was not physically present. What is less clear is whom the servants in the parables represent. In **verse 41**, Peter asks whether Jesus intends these teachings for “us” (that is, the disciples mentioned in verse 22) or more broadly for “everyone” (both **professing believers** and unbelievers). Jesus does not answer the question directly, but in response he contrasts a “faithful” manager (**v 42**) and a servant who winds up placed with the “unbelievers” (**v 46**, literally the “faithless”).

In the following verses, Jesus introduces a distinction between a servant who knows their master’s will but chooses not to do it (**v 47**) and one who earns punishment for themselves without knowing any better (**v 48**). The former might be characterized as professing Christians (especially leaders) who know Jesus’ will but choose not to obey it; they will be “beaten with many blows.” The latter are unbelievers; they are servants of Jesus as well, no less obligated to serve the one who is indisputably the master of all people in all places. But they do not know how to do so and thus their punishment will be relatively less. In the end, it is a matter of stewardship; much will be expected from the one who has been entrusted with knowledge and given

responsibility for Christ’s servants. Others are still obligated to serve Jesus, but their responsibility is relatively less.

It may seem hard to reconcile Jesus’ words here with the message of grace and forgiveness that is at the heart of the **gospel** message. It is certainly true that when Jesus returns, the only hope that any

Jesus never allows us to separate our trust in him from our obedience to him.



of us have is located in Christ’s mercy and forgiveness, not in our own merit. It is his faithfulness that saves us, not our own. And believers in Christ never need to fear that they might be condemned in the final judgment (see John 5:24).

But Jesus never allows us to separate our trust in him from our obedience to him (see Luke 6:43-46); following Jesus’ commands is a mark that distinguishes a true believer from someone who merely pays lip service to Jesus as his or her master. A servant who is fundamentally disobedient is a faithless (or unbelieving) servant. Faithful servants can anticipate their master’s pleasure and gracious reward (see Matthew 25:23); faithless servants can expect only punishment (see Matthew 25:45-46).

Don’t Know When

These parables serve as both an encouragement and a warning, and at their heart is the dynamic of a master’s surprise return (Luke **12:38** and **v 46**). It is easy to do what is right when you know that you will be held accountable for your actions, but real faithfulness and integrity are demonstrated by doing right even when it does not seem that there will be consequences for doing wrong. The servants show their true colors by how they act when they do not expect their master’s return. In the same way, when the Son of Man returns at an hour that we do not expect (**v 40**), his servants’ true colors will be revealed.

There is a tension in the New Testament regarding the timing of Jesus' return. It is clear that we cannot know when it will occur; during his time on earth even Jesus himself did not know when the time would come (Mark 13:32-33). Various **cults** and false prophets have claimed to know when Jesus would return, but Christians should not be deceived. The Son of Man will return at an hour when we do not expect him.

But on the other side of the tension is the New Testament's witness that there will be certain observable events that will take place before Jesus returns. Later on in Luke's Gospel we read of signs in the heavens that will serve as evidence that the time for Jesus' return has come:

"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your **redemption** is drawing near." (Luke 21:25-28)

It may require wisdom to know which events are being referred to by those signs, but what is clear is that there are things that must occur before Jesus returns (for other examples, see Mark 13:10 and 2 Thesalonians 2:3-4). So we can say that certain signs will precede Jesus' return, and yet it will happen suddenly and in a way that defies our attempts to pinpoint an exact time.

(For a more complete examination of the biblical data, see Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, pages 1091-1105. You may not necessarily agree with all of Dr. Grudem's conclusions, but you'll benefit from the careful consideration of the relevant biblical texts.)

Therefore, Be Ready

All of Jesus' teaching here is aimed at producing a response in his hearer. Knowledge of the future changes the way we live in the

present. If a homeowner knew when the thief was planning to break into his house, he would stay home and thwart the robbery (Luke **12:39**). In the same way, since we have been forewarned that Jesus will return at a time when we do not expect him, we ought to take appropriate measures to make sure that we are among those who are rewarded, and not among those who are cut to pieces and numbered among the unbelievers.

Those measures are described in **verse 35**, where Jesus tells his disciples to “be dressed ready for service” (literally, “your loins are to be girded ready for service”). Much as a modern-day workman might lace up his boots and roll up his sleeves before a day on the jobsite, people in the ancient world would tuck up their flowing garments in order to engage in hard work (there may well be an allusion here to the commandment given to the Israelites in Exodus 12:11). In the same way, in Luke **12:35** the disciples are instructed to “keep your lamps burning.” Oil lamps were put out at bedtime in order to save fuel; only someone keeping an alert watch would leave their lamp burning all night. That sort of vigilance and preparedness is the only proper response to the fact that Jesus will return suddenly.

Jesus leaves it up to his hearers to discern what preparedness looks like. But in the context of Luke’s Gospel, we might speculate as to some of the behaviors that comprise the faithfulness that Jesus will reward. These might include:

- fear of the Lord (v 5)
- boldness in witness (v 8-9)
- radical generosity (v 33)
- care for fellow believers (**v 42-43**)
- general obedience to the commands of the Lord (**v 47**)

Jesus’ teaching is meant to elicit a response like that of Jonathan Edwards, who, when he was a young man, made this resolution:

“Resolved, never to do any thing which I should be afraid to do if I expected it would not be above an hour before I should hear the last trump.”

(The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One, page 21)

Questions for reflection

1. What do your present actions suggest you truly believe about the future, and the extent to which Jesus’ return affects those beliefs?
2. “Faithful servants can anticipate their master’s pleasure and gracious reward.” What does this motivate you to do in your Master’s service today?
3. Is there a temptation to disobedience you regularly give in to, which you could resist by saying to yourself, “Be dressed ready for service”?

PART TWO

Surprising Words

In Luke **12:51**, Jesus asks **rhetorically** if the disciples think that he came to bring peace on earth. He quickly dispels any such notion, but perhaps we can understand why some of his disciples might have gotten the wrong impression. After all, the angels had responded to the birth of Jesus with a declaration of peace on earth (2:14), and the prophet Isaiah had spoken of the one who would come as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus himself said that he was leaving his own unique peace with his disciples (John 14:27), and the **apostle** Peter was able to summarize the gospel message as “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36).

But **Simeon** had already seen that the child Jesus was “destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). And even the angels that appeared to the shepherds had acknowledged that the peace that would come with the arrival of Jesus was not one that would be spread out universally among all people. It was particularly for those “on whom [God’s] favor rests” (2:14).

That assumed distinction between the world as a whole and those specific people on whom God’s favor rests may help us to understand Jesus’ startling teaching here. The coming of Jesus would result in a fundamental separation on earth (**12:51**), and the clear implication is that this separation would be based on whether people received or rejected the message and person of Jesus. This division was so powerful that it even would break apart the most tightly unified human institution: the family. For example, a family of five would be split, with two of its members now opposed to the other three (**v 52**). Because of the arrival of Jesus, relationships that God created to be intensely intimate (fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, etc.) now would be characterized by opposition and antagonism

(v 53). What accounts for this surprising division, and how can we understand that it would not merely be an accident of Jesus' coming but rather the point of it?

Fire and Baptism

In **verse 49**, Jesus says that he has come to “bring fire on the earth.” **John the Baptist** had used fire as a picture of the way that the one who was coming would bring judgment and the purging of evil (3:9, 17), and certainly that judgment would come in a full way at the second coming of Christ (remember 12:45-48). It is most likely this end-time fire that Jesus longed to kindle, since it would establish God's righteous kingdom in a final way. But we can say that the division that Jesus speaks of in **verses 51-53**—that split which will naturally occur between those who receive the message of Jesus with joy and those who reject him—amounts to a preliminary experience of that end-time fire. When family members divide along the lines of their response to Jesus, it reveals which of them are those on whom the favor of God rests. The division demonstrates who are the faithful servants and who will be taken away in the fire of end-time judgment. The new spiritual distinction between people will result even in opposition within families.

In **verse 50**, Jesus speaks of a baptism that he has yet to undergo, making it clear that he is not referring to his baptism in the Jordan by John. The image of being plunged beneath the waters in baptism can be understood as a symbolic picture of God's judgment. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the text of Job 9:31 uses a form of the word *bapto* to describe the way that Job believes that God will plunge him into a pit. In certain places in the Old Testament, God's judgment is pictured as a flood of overwhelming water (see Isaiah 8:7-8 and Jonah 2:3-6). Darrell Bock puts it this way:

“Thus the point of the **metaphor** is that Jesus faces a period of being uniquely inundated with God's judgment, an allusion to rejection and persecution.” (*Luke 9:51 –24:53*, page 1194)

When Jesus speaks of his upcoming baptism, he is referring to his crucifixion and all of the events that lead up to it.

In Luke **12:49-50** Jesus expresses a strong desire for these events to take place. He wishes that the fire of judgment “were already kindled,” and he feels that he is under constraint until his baptism is completed. Luke has told us already that Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem (9:51), where he will endure the judgment of God on the cross. Jesus is constrained by his understanding of the two-fold mission on which his Father has sent him—a mission which corresponds to the division that he brings. On one hand, for those who reject him the result of Jesus’ coming will be the fires of divine judgment. But on the other hand, Jesus will himself experience the flood of God’s **wrath** on the cross for those on the other side of the divide, those who receive him in faith.

Good Division?

Ours is an age that prizes tolerance and inclusion, and the Bible itself commends unity in many places (e.g. Psalm 133:1; Acts 4:32; Ephesians 4:3). In that light, Jesus’ passion for division here can be shocking. But there is a sense in which the Bible is all about making a division between people. From the very beginning, there has been a bright line marking off the people of God from the people who are in rebellion against him. People were either in the ark built by Noah or they were outside of it. People were either **circumcised** members of Abraham’s family or they were cut off from God’s people (see Genesis 17:10-14). Even now, people are either members of God’s household or are foreigners and strangers (see Ephesians 2:19).

In that light, it is easier to understand why Jesus’ arrival can be cast in terms of setting people against each other. People who reject him and his message place themselves in opposition to God himself (Luke 10:16). And so the division that Jesus brings is simply an inevitable separation between sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-33), between those who belong to the light and those who walk in darkness

(1 Thessalonians 5:4-9). If this makes us uncomfortable, it is likely because our understanding of Jesus is unbalanced.

David Tiede is correct when he says:

“Those who would reduce Jesus to a sentimental savior of a dotting God have not come to terms with the depth of divine passion, of the wrath and love of God which is revealed in Jesus’ word, will, and obedience even unto death.”

(Quoted in Bock, *Luke 9:51 – 24:53*, page 1196)

If we would be faithful to Jesus, we must be willing to embrace the separation that he brings. In some denominations it is fashionable to argue in the name of unity that Christians should remain in churches even after they have abandoned the gospel and embraced **theological** positions that contradict the Bible’s clear teaching. But Jesus seems to know nothing of unity that is not rooted in a genuine faith in him and his truth (see John 17:20-23).

We must not miss how extraordinary Jesus’ teaching here really is. Teachers do not normally claim priority over family relationships, but Jesus does. There are many places in the world where a person’s decision to follow Christ means that they will be cut off by and from their families. In other places, one person’s decision to follow Christ may introduce awkwardness into the life of a family or tension into a marriage. Those things are very difficult to deal with, but none of them constitute legitimate grounds for not following Jesus. We simply cannot hold any loyalty above our loyalty to Christ; he is no ordinary teacher and his disciples may have to pay a very high price in order to follow him.

Jesus knows nothing of unity that is not rooted in a genuine faith in him.

Read the Signs

Jesus' attention moves from the disciples, where it has been ever since Luke 12:22, to "the crowd" (v 54) of "hypocrites" (as he calls them in v 56). The people were adept at reading the signs of "the earth and the sky" when they pointed to a change of weather; a cloud in the west would bring heavy moisture from the Mediterranean Sea and frequently result in a rainstorm (v 54). Wind from the south would travel over the desert regions and normally indicated the arrival of high temperatures (v 55). But in light of their aptitude for discerning the significance of certain meteorological indicators, Jesus wonders at their inability to "interpret this present time" (v 56).

The word translated as "time" (*kairon*) has the sense of an opportunity that has been presented, or a season that has begun but will only last a certain amount of time. Jesus had come, bringing the **kingdom of God** with him and giving clear evidence of God's work through him, but most of the people had ignored the signs. Thus, the members of the crowd were not "hypocrites" in the sense that we normally give to the word (someone who says one thing but intentionally does another), but rather, because they gave the outward impression of being people who understood the world around them when in fact they had no clue about the important things that were taking place in their midst. The rebuking tone that Jesus takes with them indicates that this failure to understand, "more a problem of the will than anything else" (Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, page 387).

The remedy for the crowd's failure to interpret the season of Christ's arrival is to "judge for yourselves what is right" (v 57). And in order to illustrate the importance of acting in light of the pressing reality of the moment, Jesus presents them with a **hypothetical** situation in **verse 58**: imagine you and an adversary are going before a magistrate in order that a financial dispute can be settled. That magistrate might send the matter to a judge, and if the judge decides the case in your opponent's favor, the consequences are dire:

you will be imprisoned until your debt is paid. In such a scenario, any person with a bit of common sense will interpret the situation accurately and take action to prevent the potential disaster. He will “try hard to be reconciled on the way” and thus prevent the matter from ever reaching the point of a condemning judgment (**v 59**). Just as they were able to read the signs that indicated the coming weather, in the same way the crowds demonstrated a kind of wisdom in their personal and financial affairs. No one with a good head on their shoulders would let a dispute escalate to the point where they would face condemning judgment.

Many of us would do well to heed Jesus’ practical advice, for when conflicts escalate there is rarely a satisfactory resolution. It is the way of wisdom to make peace before things get out of hand, and it brings the name of Jesus into disrepute when Christians cannot resolve their differences without involving civil authorities (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). It is much better to make peace before you have to pay the price for your offenses.

If that is true in human interaction, it is even more so when we consider our relationship with God. Just as we should be reconciled with our opponents before it is too late, so Jesus is urging the crowds to show common sense by being reconciled to God during this time of his ministry among them. If Jesus has in fact come to bring fire to the earth (Luke **12:49**), then it would be wise to be reconciled to God (the ultimate judge) before it is too late. Sin has left each one of us with a debt toward God that we cannot repay (remember the imagery of 7:41-49). But the coming of Jesus signifies that we are in a time when we can still be reconciled to God through him. There will be a time when it is too late and the judgment against us will have been rendered. The warning to us is clear: do not delay! Do not miss out on the time to be made right with God.

Questions for reflection

1. To whom are Jesus' words here on the family and division a reassurance? To whom would they be a challenge?
2. Have you witnessed unfaithful unity? Have you witnessed unhelpful division? What principles can help us navigate these difficult judgments without making either error, do you think?
3. Have Jesus' words here reshaped your view of him in any way? How?